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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 003843

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TAGS: [MARR](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: SENATOR NELSON'S MEETING WITH DEFENSE  
MINISTER MURR

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason: Section 1.4 (d)  
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Summary

11. (C) Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Elias Murr explained to Senator Bill Nelson that Syria has three immediate objectives in Lebanon: to produce political chaos by supporting proxies like Hizballah, to regain its former control of the Lebanese government, and to re-establish its past hegemony over the surrounding region. Murr focused his concerns and warnings on the reported interest by the USG to improve relations with the Syrian government, in an effort to gain Syrian help assistance in Iraq. Murr warned about allowing Syria a "free hand" to interfere in Lebanon to create political chaos and re-assert its control. He stated that Syrian President Bashar al-Asad and his regime had not changed its behavior or policies towards Lebanon and will always treat it like a Syrian possession. Otherwise, Murr indicated that since July 2006, there had been no reports of arms smuggling across the Syrian border. Murr thanked the Senator for the 300 HUMVEES that will be delivered by the U.S. to the Lebanese Armed Forces(LAF) over the next year. End Summary.

Murr: US/Syrian Cooperation Comes  
at the Expense of Lebanon

12. (C) Senator Nelson and his staff, along with the Ambassador and Emboffs, met with Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Elias Murr at his residence on December 14. Senator Nelson started by giving a readout of his meeting with Syrian President Bashar al-Asad on December 13. The Senator expressed his concerns about Syria's behavior in the region and indicated he remained firm about steps that Syria had to take before further improvement in U.S. relations could occur. Asad indicated the he was open to cooperating on border control issues dealing with Iraq. The Senator indicated that the Brammertz Report had also noted Syrian cooperation in its investigation. Listening to Senator Nelson's comments, Murr expressed his concerns and caveats about the press reports that USG would open a dialogue with the Syrian regime to gain its assistance in Iraq. Murr cautioned against allowing Syria to regain control of Lebanon. Murr was adamant that the Syrian regime, especially President Asad, had not changed. Asad was taking advantage of the USG's difficulties in Iraq for his own political

survival. Asad was "playing for time" in the hope that political developments might relieve the international political pressure on his regime.

Murr: Different Words,  
But Same Regime  
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13. (C) Murr reiterated that nothing had changed in the Syrian government, especially with regard to its behavior on regional security issues. Murr cited the continued lax security by the Syrian regime on the Syria/Iraq border, allowing militants to enter Iraq, and Syria's continued support of Islamic militants in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, describing this as more than conjecture. Murr indicated that from 1998-2004, when he had been Interior Minister, he had seen the Syrian connection with Hizballah militant cells trained in the Biga' Valley. He claimed that during his tenure he broke up many of the cells. To make a point of the dangers of confronting Syria over its militant proxies in Lebanon, Murr claimed that his reward for breaking up these cells was the "100 kilos of TNT" used to attack him in an assassination attempt in July 2005.

14. (C) Murr indicated that the Syrian President has given him the impression that he was "set on proving" that the Bush Administration's Middle East policy is a failure. Asad, while publicly signaling cooperation with the USG on regional security issue in the region, still sees the U.S. as an "enemy spy" that needs to be removed from the region. He will continue to covertly promote anti-U.S. policy goals by means such as support for Hizballah and Palestinian militant groups, as well as al-Qaeda, and continue to interfere with

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pro-Western governments in the region, like Lebanon, all as a way to regain Syrian influence in the region.

The Roots of Asad's Behavior  
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15. (C) Murr went further to describe the personality of Syrian President Asad and the roots of his behavior. Murr indicated he knew "Bashar" since he was a young man. He related his personal views on Asad. Bashar al-Asad had an inferiority "complex" and was living in the shadow of his father, Hafez al-Asad. Due to his educational background, in medical science, he had grown up outside the normal paths to power in Syria, which are the military and intelligence services. After becoming President, he has tried to overcompensate, in large part for political survival, by trying to appear tougher on traditional Syrian political issues like Palestian statehood and Syrian influence in Lebanon. He had learned a perverse policy lesson from his father, specifically, that a "burned" Lebanon means a secure Syria. Murr had to admit that even after all these years, talking to Asad is like talking to someone in a "different language" and he sees Lebanon as Syria's "Hong Kong." Murr has told Asad that Syria could have "many friends in the Lebanon" if it would stop trying to maintain its dominance through military and covert actions.

Real U.S./Syrian Cooperation  
Requires Change in Regime  
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16. (C) Murr was frank about prospects for the U.S. engaging with the Syrian regime. He indicated that it would take a wholesale change in the government before any real diplomatic opening will produce a safer and secure region. Murr argued that if an election were held today in Syria, the "Alawite regime" would be replaced immediately with a moderate "Sunni" regime. Murr felt that a Sunni government in Syria would be more conducive to regional stability and less interested in meddling in Lebanese internal affairs.

Murr: No Arms Smuggling  
Across Syrian Border  
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17. (C) Senator Nelson asked whether arms smuggling across the Syrian border continues. Murr stated that no arms smuggling had taken place or had been reported since July 2006. He went further to say that this cut in arm supplies was one of the reasons why Hizballah was publicly attacking the Siniora government. Hizballah was finding it difficult to smuggle arms into Lebanon. He pointed out that for the first time in 30 years, a "free" Lebanese government is controlling the Lebanese military. Syrian-supported militant groups are finding it hard to re-supply their inventory. When the Senator brought up the Israeli claims of arms smuggling to Hizballah across the Syrian border, Murr countered that with all the overflights of Israeli combat jets, drones and satellites, if "one truck of arms tried to cross that border, Israeli F-16 jets would destroy it." (Note: Murr has made this claim in other meetings. It is not clear on what sources he is basing his positive assumption about the absence of arms smuggling. End note.)

LAF are Stretched Monitoring the Border,  
Request for Surveillance Equipment  
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18. (C) Senator Nelson brought up the future delivery of 300 HMMVWs to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). Murr thanked the Senator and Ambassador for the assistance. Murr stated that his forces are currently stretched to the limit. He specifically cited the 8,000 troops deployed to monitor the Lebanon/Syrian border. He said he was looking for assistance in obtaining radar and surveillance equipment to help reduce the number of troops required. Murr stated that he would prefer that this equipment come from the U.S., but with the needs of his forces so great, he would consider European sources if necessary.

The Outlook for Hizballah Integration  
into the Ranks

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19. (C) Murr stated that current LAF strength stands at 59,200 troops. The sect breakdown for the armed forces stands at 84.5 percent Christian, Druze and Sunni and 15.5 percent Shia. The officer corps is set at a 50-50 split between Muslims and Christians. Murr recounted for us that when he came on as Defense Minister, Shia soldiers accounted for approximately half of the LAF's then-40,000 troops. Recognizing that Hizballah's fighters are almost all Shia, Murr allowed the LAF to shed several thousand Shia troops, on the pretext that Hizballah would one day be folded into the LAF. In so doing, he reduced the Shia component of the LAF's troop strength to less than the "legal" requirement of one-third. He gave the impression that he did not expect Hizballah ever to join the LAF. When the Senator inquired about the likelihood of Hizballah laying down its arms, Murr in a quick response, said "never."

10. (U) This message has been cleared the staff of Senator Nelson.

FELTMAN